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AUTHOR Froese, Elmer E.
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ABSTRACT

Canada's national educational system elicits diverse curricular demands and requires discreet, sensitive responses. In spite of perennial funding shortfalls, Canada's schools have been remarkably successful in meeting those demands. During and after the 1960s, educational change came as a result of two very strong sets of expectations. One broad area of demand was for more open, flexible schools with an emphasis on student rights and currency of curricula. The other issue involved the desire by students for the right to dissent. In the past 20 years, Canada's schools have made Herculean curricular and methodological responses to both sets of demands. An example of where schools did not do so well was in responding to expectations and demands for individualization of instruction. Canadians rushed into non-gradedness, open-area classrooms, and class size reduction campaigns. Lasting curricular adaptation is, however, a complex and evolving enterprise. Professional development and renewal is the best means of embedding educational change in school systems. Schools are expected to achieve multiculturalism in its richest Canadian sense, but are also facing demands for nurturing specific cultural identity and values. Schools face an ever-expanding mandate in many areas, notably including values and technological education. While there are always challenges of higher expectations and lower resources, Canadian educators are well positioned to succeed. (TES)

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SOCIETAL DEMANDS
ON
THE CURRICULUM

An address given to the
Canadian Education Association
Regina, Saskatchewan

September 28, 1988

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ELMER E. FROESE
Superintendent of Schools
Burnaby, B.C.

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Our Canadian society is unique in that it is constitutionally bicultural and traditionally multicultural. Canada is a nation with historical ethnocultural threads which originate in all parts of the world. It is a country with regional cultures which are the product of geographic/sociocultural and economic forces that have been encouraged to develop freely in a democratic context.

We, in this room, can trace our roots back to many lands and to times in another place, in another era, when and where monoculturalism was the norm. Education was often doctrinaire and singular in its thrust, or education was available only to a privileged few and withheld from those who were left in a form of intellectual bondage.

We, in Canada, and our neighbour to the South, established a system of schooling unique on this earth. In establishing our schools over a century, we drew on the social genius of our collective forefathers who by and large rejected the stratified caste-like educational institutions of their lands of origin.

We became a nation of free tax-supported schools where children of school age were with few exceptions expected to attend. While we evolved as a nation and acquired our national identity, our young went to school more together than apart. And where there was apartness we were still largely intertwined in universities, teacher training institutions and in communities more characterized by bonds than rifts. While Canada cannot be viewed with Polyannaish naivety, we have been spared the torment of Belfast, the anguish of Beirut and the torn social fabric of the two Germanies or the two Koreas.

Canadian society has invested heavily in its schools. Like investers seeking a return, the taxpayers in Canada who bank on their schools demand a return. The expectations held of our schools in general or of any one classroom in particular are as diverse as our populace. Having created schools for the full social spectrum, the school systems are now expected to simultaneously serve all their constituents.

We see education as a social integrator and as the "great equalizer." It is our way of saying that all are born equal.

The inclusive school with its broad curriculum designed to serve all comers is both a magnificent institution and a massive challenge. It elicits diverse demands and requires discreet, sensitive responses.

I will not chronicle all the demands made of our schools or catalogue the expected learning outcomes of curricula which serve the entire spectrum of a free democratic society. I wish to make it very clear that I do not view the demands made of our schools as unrealistic, the expectations too high nor do I believe that these demands and expectations should be resisted or diluted by token response. The resources provided are not equal to the task.

I will attempt to show how remarkably successful we have been, and are, in utilizing our schools to serve society in spite of this perennial shortfall of funding and resources. But first I wish to deal with that very basic notion of societal demands or expectations.

Society does not speak with one voice. In fact it is far more common that issues polarize, often with strong dissenting views based on partisan, ideological and sometimes theological views and values. The educator, the teacher, and those who shape programs and curricula must first find the common ground, the shared concerns, and then respond.

And so we have -- sensing the generally held expectations, interpolating and interpreting the sometimes harsh and impatient demands -- and then adjusting the curricula, the programs, the courses and even the total ethos of our schools. To change a social institution, to redirect a public enterprise encompassing all the young of a society is like pushing a cannon ball up a hill with a straw, like turning or stopping a supertanker.

Why is educational change or response so slow?

It requires changing how a whole culture of professionals -- themselves individuals with values and commitments -- to an altered way of believing and behaving. People don't suddenly think and behave differently in concert.

It requires the development of new and different methods and professional techniques.

It requires achieving an acceptance in adults and parents of many things very different than when they were in school and we are all value bound to our past.

Allow me to illustrate what I mean by slow and fast. You judge whether hastening gently is how lasting change is best achieved. Our nation's schools came out of the post-war 40's and were not unlike the schools of the early 20th century. By the 1960's there were two very strong sets of expectations -- often expressed as student demands.

One broad area of demand was for more open, flexible schools with an emphasis upon student rights, currency of content and a strong anti-establishment climate prevailed. Rules, dress codes and restrictions were challenged. Requiring a hall pass was met with ridicule. Student protests and walkouts were rampant. Two very basic curricular issues underlay that crescendo of expectations and demands. Under the banner of demanding "relevance", students were pleading for currency in instructional content, a future orientation rather than retrospect and they wanted interaction with their teachers. A second

issue far more methodological than the content issue was that of dissent. The students, supported by many adults, demanded and exercised their right to disagree and to dissent. In combination the demands for relevance and for dissent had both major content and methodological implications.

If you contrast the scene of the mid-sixties to that of the mid-eighties, the comparison reveals a massive and highly effective response over two decades. Curricular material today is dynamic. It is current in content and presentation. Subjects like History, Science, Language are studied and taught with a high reliance upon contemporary issues, world affairs and value contexts.

In regard to dissent, students in our high schools and universities express their disagreement and dissent far more effectively, responsibly and persuasively than we did in the sixties. While many current conditions like youth unemployment, lack of post-secondary opportunity, and a blighted environment might well trigger unrest, student leaders usually demonstrate more temperance and skill in their dissent than do our adult leaders.

In contrast to their peers of the sixties or those of us educated then and before, today's students have been well taught. In twenty years, Canada's schools have made a Herculean curricular and methodological response to the expectations and demands of twenty years ago.

An example of where schools did not do so well was in response to the expectations and demands for individualization of instruction. I believe we responded too hastily. Sensing the compelling rightness of treating each student as worthy of direct attention, we rushed into non-gradedness, open area classrooms and crash class size reduction campaigns. While each of these responses had the potential of great success in terms of effectiveness, we often allowed structure and organization to precede the curricular and methodological base. It was almost like marrying too young.

Following the powerful exhortations of Madeline Hunter and John Goodlad, thousands of schools were ungraded before the teachers fully understood and were operationally committed to continuous progress. Flexible open space instruction was proven to be effective if it supported a well designed interactive curriculum, but too often we simply build schools without classroom walls for teachers trained and experienced only to teach in individual isolated classrooms.

During the early seventies, massive amounts of money went into class size reduction campaigns. Relatively insignificant amounts were committed to training and retraining teachers to teach differently and hence to be more effective with smaller classes. We responded but we didn't produce the expected results.

As a confident advocate of individualization, flexible instructional space and reduced class size, I regret that we allowed ourselves to be pushed by expectations and demands at a pace which exceeded our acquisition of a strong curricular and professional base.

If any of you are skeptical and thinking that I'm speaking as an apologist -- not so. To change an educational institution, its curriculum and its methodology is terribly complex -- especially in a public enterprise. Give me a sliver of society, present me with the narrow consensus of a vested interest group, and I'll give you quick response and results. Effective response to broad societal wishes requires a time span of over a decade -- if you want lasting change for the better.

Having examined the concept of response to expectations allow me to pose three premises -

1. Canadian schools by and large are inclusive and serve a vast social spectrum.

2. Lasting curricular adapation is complex and ongoing.

3. Professional development and renewal is the best means of imbedding educational change in school systems.

In spite of the complexity and relatively slow pace of educational response to expectations, public confidence in schools' ability to respond is high. Over two thousand submissions to the recent B.C. Royal Commission on Education clearly reflected both high expectations and a confident reliance upon public schools as the best means of meeting these expectations. The recent AIDS crisis evoked a strong demand that schools meet the sudden need for awareness and information about AIDS. The 1988 American Gallup Poll revealed that 90% of the respondents supported AIDS education in schools. Such overwhelming consensus can accelerate the rate of response. Not encumbered by inconclusive debate, school systems mobilized curricular resources and achieved fast-track programmatic responses. Not since the patriotic fervour of the last great war has any issue catalyzed such a clear public demand and immediate response.

In contrast to such a crisis issue there is a constant array of expectations and demands where public opinion has coalesced very slowly. In these areas where public opinion is unclear but obviously changing, schools must keep pace and sometimes even lead. School systems have accepted this challenge and have met numerous demands thereby demonstrating why society can have such confidence in its schools.

As social conscience has moved us away from segregated and institutionalized settings for the mentally handicapped and the

physically challenged, educators have mounted programs to meet special needs. Seeking to achieve the potential of each individual student, educators have developed programs and methodology which enable schools to achieve as a norm what was a faint hope in the fifties, an expectation in the sixties and a viable undertaking in the seventies. Special education today seeks the integration of all students to the extent constructively possible. Schools seek to educate all in the least restrictive environment possible.

Yes, resources are always in short supply but the onetime expectations associated with one-time innovations such as IEP's, CAI and DS have been met and surpassed. Thousands of students once in immersion programs for the retarded and brilliant minds locked in handicapped bodies are now learning through Individual Education Programs, with Computer-Assisted Instruction, supported by Differentiated Staffs including personal care attendants and other support staff. The trendy acronyms of the sixties (IEP, CAI, DS) are now realities. The demand for deinstitutionalization of isolated settings in special classes or out of school centres has been met in many school systems by adoption of specialized teaching and learning techniques and efforts to normalize the environment for those with special needs.

Another demand where the visible response catalyzed support, where controversy and resistance were once common, is in the area of bilingualism. British Columbia is only one example of where the muted resentment toward constitutional bilingualism of the early seventies is now displaced by support for multilingualism with French language programs and French Immersion classes now fully accepted and sought after. Be it expectation, demand, or both, the response is impressive and encouraging.

Remember the youthful Canadian who was not as fit as the 60 year old Swede? The prevalence of physical fitness, and nutritional education programs in schools across Canada again testify to the validity of perceptiveness and gradual sound curricular response. Allied with national programs like "Participaction," schools addressed a nation-wide concern about lack of fitness. We achieved results. Today, daily P.E., aerobics and nutrition education are more the norm than the exception.

As an educator, I take pride in the extent to which we have succeeded in meeting the public's demands. As an administrator, I'm staggered by the vast discrepancy between what is expected of schools and the resources provided to respond. As a parent of a pre-school child, I am concerned that we not allow our system of democratic, universal free public education be weakened or to disintegrate. It has achieved much and has major challenges before it. Our school systems are our means of social adjustment to divisive forces.

Having looked back and observing that response to expectation and demands is gradual, allow me to briefly touch some major challenges that are before us. The Canadian cultural mosaic is both precious and unique. For over a century we have used our schools to weave a social fabric of many cultural threads. We have responded to diversity by equating it with richness and have deflected racist tendencies with multicultural education programs which celebrate ethnocultural diversity as a valuable commodity. In doing so, we placed in the mainstream of our society an amalgam of cultures, of values, and of belief systems.

Schools are expected to integrate, to provide equal opportunity, to facilitate a valuing of each person as worthy as the other. No small task.

I was once asked by a West German, confused by our cultural collage, "What-really-is a Canadian?" I looked at his attractive tweed jacket and replied. "We weave the threads of many cultures -- Scots, Ukrainians, French, Native Indians, Sikhs, into a fine fabric, rich in the best that each culture brings. A Canadian is like your jacket. If we accepted only one cultural thread or dyed them all the same, over time we'd have a monoculture like my blue blazer. A Canadian is like a fine tweed."

He understood, though the concept was somewhat alien to him!

Schools are expected to achieve multiculturalism in its richest Canadian sense. But there are also strong demands for specific cultural identity and heritage preservation. If these particular values take precedence over the maintenance of an overall Canadian fabric, we will have not a tweed but a checkered coat. So as we in our schools respond to demands for multiculturalism and heritage language programs, we must be alert to "tribalization" -- the setting aside of togetherness in favour of cultural insularity -- with the attendant risk of conflict rather than mutual understanding.

One of the areas where expectations and demands permeate all curricula is that of values. There is no one curricular niche or program where the conflicting value systems can be demonstrated and reconciled. So teachers may face Biology classes where students hold pro-life and pro-choice views, where creationist and evolutionist points of view prevail or where Muslims, Jews, Christians, and agnostics study from one text. A discussion of a literary selection dealing with a suicide may evoke radically opposed views from students of Arab, Japanese, or Amish descent. Their views of a self-inflicted death vary greatly. The demand is for a non-prejudicial teacher, for objective treatment. We have come a long way from the days when there were only one or two value systems in the classroom or when such diversity could be ignored. School systems have responded to these diverse demands by mounting intensive professional development programs. Faced with a burgeoning curriculum,

teachers have responded by acquiring skills and professional expertise equal to meet the demands.

To illustrate the expanding mandate for school systems -- in 1976, British Columbia secondary schools were required to offer 18 constant and elective programs. In 1986, all of these 18 were still required plus specific course additions required in many of these programs, plus additional graduation requirements, plus 15 mandatory programs such as Special Education, Gifted, Physically Handicapped, French Immersion, Career Preparation, Consumer Education, etc.

We experienced an eighty percent increase in mandated secondary school program requirements. Ironically, this was coincident with a forty percent decrease in staff due to restraint measures and declining enrolment. The problem: how to simultaneously meet expanded program expectations and the demand for higher quality and standards with diminished resources.

The crux of the perennial challenge of dealing with expectations is one of perspective. Schools must focus on "How," not "If." An open examination of public demands requires a receptive ear. As public opinion achieves critical mass supporting a demand philosophically and materially, the rate and degree of response increases proportionally, provided the expectations are clearly represented and perceived.

I will briefly address the array of expectations associated with hi-tech and computers. However, if one places this area in perspective, technology is not so much a demand, as it is a resource -- a tool. Viewed in terms of its potential to empower teachers to teach more, better, faster and for students to engage in easier access to and acquisition of knowledge, the microchip is analogous to the printing press as nuclear fission was to gunpowder. Coupled with effective professional development programs based on sound pedagogy, computer technology becomes a liberator and a powerful tool facilitating schools' response to other demands.

When first facing the demand for computer education, as it was called, schools responded by mounting more courses such as computer basics, programming, computer logic, etc., thereby adding to curriculum overload. As we acquired clearer understanding, school systems shifted to utilizing the computer as tools in the basic curricular subjects. Public interest and support were strong. Curriculum experts demanded software appropriate to high priority areas of instruction. In many school systems, the quantum leap of response was achieved. Students and teachers acquired the requisite skills and got on with achieving curricular expectations using the computer.

So, using Burnaby as an illustration: in less than two years, we saw a

phenomenal response and schools leading with pride in areas where a short while earlier they felt besieged with demands. Word processing is not a course, it is a tool in English classes. Social Studies classes interact daily networking by satellite with students in Paris, Moscow, or Los Angeles, comparing views on news bulletins picked up from numerous international news services. Computer-assisted instruction allows a mute paraplegic to speak to his father by use of a modified joystick and a word processor/synthesizer. The father overcomes his anguished rejection of a son he thought was retarded -- now seeing the brilliant mind once trapped in the warped body. The school board closes its eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth schools with two celebrating their closure and full public support -- to amass the resources for constructing a hi-tech school of the future. The expectations and demands are in focus -- critical mass is achieved and response is rapid. Like the response to demands for AIDS education, a school system reacts very quickly -- not because of crisis but because of clarity of goal and solid support.

Yes, there will continue to be areas of tension and school systems may still be perceived as unresponsive. Insufficient resources to accept a severely handicapped or emotionally disturbed student into a regular classroom setting cannot be resolved by strident advocacy or by a court decision. When basic value systems conflict and one group perceives a five inch knife as a dangerous weapon and another group views it as a religious symbol, a policy decision cannot resolve the issue. The solution rests in the schools' ability to reconcile differing views of what is right.

In conclusion, let's take stock. It would be easy to slip into bemoaning the overburdened curricula and the strained school systems. As a Superintendent of Schools, I could depict a compelling disaster scenario. What is more important however is to recognize the social equity and professional capital that Canadian school systems possess. With a democratic system committed to preserving both cultural traditions and national unity, and with one of the best systems of universal public education in the world, we are well positioned to continue to succeed. An objective appraisal of what has been achieved in our short lifetime or comparisons with the school systems many of us have visited in other countries, testifies to major progress and response to social and educational issues. Complaining is dangerous, and depression is debilitating. We have the resources, the professionally trained staff and the experience of successful achievements -- a powerful basis to do more, as we must.